

Louisiana Visit Helps Washington State Responder Learn About Disaster Recovery

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BATON ROUGE - For Clay White, director of Planning and Development Services for Washington's Snohomish County, preparation mixed with a bit of good luck - both coming from a trip to Louisiana to tour recovery areas - made him ready to respond to the deadly mudslide that occurred Mar. 22, 2014, near Oso, Washington.

"When I came to Snohomish County, I saw the gap that existed between land-use planning and hazard mitigation, and I wanted to be prepared in the event of an emergency," White said. "I wanted to learn about how I needed to respond in my role."

Just as White was feeling the need for more training, he happened to hear about a trip to Louisiana being planned for October 2013 by Washington's Coalition of Recovery Planners and headed up by Casey Broom from Pierce County's Department of Emergency Management.

The goals of the visit were to view areas of the state still recovering from Hurricane Isaac and to meet with local, parish and state officials about how they handled response and recovery to five major storms in seven years.

The group had already reached out to officials from St. John the Baptist Parish; they were directed to the Louisiana Office of Community Development's Disaster Recovery Unit by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Disaster Recovery Support group.

White was one of seven officials from Washington who came to Louisiana. OCD-DRU staff organized a meeting with the touring group that also included key personnel from the Louisiana Housing Corporation and the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. Additionally, OCD-DRU staff connected them to the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority and suggested they visit Terrebonne Parish to view their recovery efforts.



Clay White (second from left) listens during the meeting with officials from OCD-DRU, LHC and GOHSEP, who discussed lessons learned and best practices from experiencing five major storms in a seven-year period. OCD-DRU personnel organized this meeting for the visiting group from Washington.

"We are always eager to share whatever we've learned through our recovery experiences," said Pat Forbes, executive director of the Louisiana Office of Community Development. "As we see natural disasters increasing around the country and the world, we hope what we've experienced and learned can improve the recovery outcomes for everyone."

When White returned to Snohomish County after the five-day visit to Louisiana, he was armed with best practices and lessons learned in disaster response and recovery, not expecting that he would need to use them anytime soon.

On Mar. 22, a mudslide impacted the north fork of the Stillaguamish River in Snohomish County, killing 43 people and impacting 49 structures. The main highway was completely blocked, and debris created a dam in the river that made a lake.

The first takeaway White used from his time in Louisiana was to think long-term.

"Prior to going to Louisiana, I didn't recognize the difference between response and recovery. From the beginning of the event, I knew there was going to be a long-term recovery, and it was helpful to frame it that way in my mind," White explained.

He was also able to remain calm in the midst of the chaos, in part because of his training and new knowledge.

"Knowing the emergency wouldn't be immediately over helped me not to overreact," White noted. "I knew in our time of crisis that I needed to stay focused and lead the team to do the right things, because if we did the wrong things, it would take longer to recover."

In response to questions from the media and the general public about the land where the disaster occurred, White's team decided to create a website where they could post all of the documents that were being requested, ensuring that anyone

who wanted could see the same information. They also built a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) map to show the impact area and where permits were issued.

"The website was the best thing we did right away," said White. "We put the information out there so that it no longer distracted from what was really important: responding to the community."

Now that several months have passed since the mudslide, White says there are long-term recovery teams in Snohomish County, made up of several different groups, who are looking at potential land-use and permit code changes, potential property buyouts for those residents whose homes were destroyed and how the slide has affected the flow of the Stillaguamish River, which could potentially change how and where the river floods.

White considers his time in Louisiana to be "an incredible blessing."

"What are the chances I would engage the emergency management department, that this trip would already be coming up and I would be given a chance to go, and then this incident happen a few months later?" he questioned, and says he is grateful for the learning opportunity.

"When you go through something tragic in life, that is not the time to prepare for what you're going to do. If possible, take advantage of all the training you can to be prepared and have a good plan in place."

In addition to the group from Washington, OCD-DRU staff members have shared their disaster recovery experience with officials from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Colorado, along with others from New Zealand, Japan and India.

The Disaster Recovery Unit within the Office of Community Development is dedicated to helping Louisiana's citizens recover from hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike and Isaac. As the state's central point for hurricane recovery, the OCD-DRU manages the most extensive rebuilding effort in American history, working closely with local, state and federal partners to ensure that Louisiana recovers safer, stronger and smarter than before.